The Longswamp Church

By CHARLES ALLABAR BUTZ

THE LONGSWAMP CHURCH, near Mertztown, Berks county, is known by that name because of its location in Longswamp township—"Der Lang Schwamm." Some have ventured a guess and claimed that it was named after a Long family. This is however incorrect, for at the time the township was named there was only one Long—Jacob Lang—who arrived August 30, 1737.

Since the early ministers were irregular and left few or no records the date of the actual organization of this early Reformed congregation is not known. However, the church record states that on Sept. 30 and Oct. 1, 1849 the centenary was observed. We know that the building of a church was begun in 1748, but when we consider that this section was settled as early as 1733, soon after the purchase from the Indians, Sept. 7, 1732, and knowing the spirit of the fathers, as we do, we are inclined to believe that an organization existed much earlier than 1748.

Let us look at the picture more closely. The following is a list of some of the founders and the date of their arrival:

Joseph Biery (Aug. 27, 1739), Samuel Burger, Jacob Burger, Philip Burger, Leopold Kreber, Theobald Carl, Nich. Schwartz, Michael Neitenauer (Sept. 3, 1739), Jacob Lang (Aug. 30, 1737), Bernhard Fegely (Aug. 28, 1733), who ,however, came to Longswamp some years later, Nicholas Mertz, David Mertz, Peter Mertz (Sept. 28, 1733), Philip Fenstermacher (Aug. 30, 1737), Joseph Fenstermacher (Sept. 9, 1738), Peter Butz (Nov. 9, 1738), Henry Bollinger (Sept. 5, 1738), Christian Ruth (Aug. 30, 1737), Johannes Deal (Aug. 27, 1739), etc.—Let him who cares draw his own conclusions.

Jacob Weimer, the teacher of this early congregation, states in his chronicle, that the building of the church was begun about September, 1748, on ground secured by Jost Heinrich Sassamanshausen through a warrant. The "Baumeister," or in today's parlance, the building committee were Joseph Biery* and Samuel Burger, who were assisted by the following fellow members: Leopold Kreber, Theobald Carl, Jacob Fenstermacher, Friedrich Hoelwig, (Cantor), Christian Fenstermacher, Johannes Diehl, Peter Butz*, Nicolaus Schwartz, Nicolaus Mertz*, David Mertz, Peter Mert, Christian Bollinger, Christian Ruch, Michael Nitenauer, Philip Burger, Nicolaus Keiser*, Peter Keiser*, Jost Sassamansheusen, Peter Walbert, Benard Fegli*, and Heinrich Stricker. (The names with an asterisk were ancestors of the writer).

Action to raze the old church and build a new one was taken on Oct. 24, 1791, when the following committee was appointed: the Rev. Heinrich Hertzel, John Butz*, Jacob Richstein, Samuel Schwartz, Jacob Lang Sr., Samuel Butz, Joseph Folk, Christian Fegeli, Henrich Fegli, Daniel Fenstermacher. (Names with an asterisk were ancestors of the writer).

The first church had stood for 43 years at the lower northern corner of the graveyard, some distance inward from the present wall. When the second church was planned there was a division among the members, some favoring the old site and others a different site. To come to a decision by majority they turned to an old German custom "the throwing of hats." They tossed their hats into the air and selected that place where most hats had fallen. It was the upper western corner of the land, about midway between the present church and the tool house, where most hats fell. A beautiful terrace was erected and there the corner stone was laid on May 28, 1791.

The present church was built in 1852, on "Mt. Zion" at a cost of $5777.20. Dr. W. A. Helffrich called this church "the most beautiful in the land." The two pastors, Rev. W. A. Helffrich and Rev. Jeremiah Schindel were on the committee. Other members were Stephen Butz and Aaron Hertzog of the Reformed congregation and David (?) Seip and John (?) Gingınger of the Lutheran. Carpenters were Charles Weiler, William Butz, Stephen Dornblaser and Reuben Butterweck. William Butz was the father of the writer. He did the fine hand carving on the interior of the church. This church building has been several times remodelled and some of the beautiful colonial effects have unfortunately been destroyed.

When the present church was built, Dr. W. A. Helffrich, the Reformed pastor, and Rev. Jeremiah Schindel, the Lutheran pastor, manifested a spirit not often seen in modern times in so-called Union Churches. Dr. Helffrich relates the following: "The old church had to be torn down. Subsequently Schindel and I selected May 4th and 5th when the last service was to be held and as a joint Communion service for both congregations—Reformed and Lutheran. Saturday afternoon we held preparatory service. Schindel preached the sermon and I conducted the liturgical service at the altar. It was impressive to see the entire congregation to kneel for the last time in the old church.

"Sunday morning I preached and Schindel conducted the altar service. Then we took the communion. I gave the elements to Schindel and Schindel to me and all the members came and united in the service. More than 400 united. O how I was saddened by the division of the two congregations. Why this schism? Why not one Church of the German tongue? The entire congregation felt the same way. Many expressed themselves thus after service. Schindel answered, 'If it would depend on Brother Helffrich and myself, it certainly would be different.'

"It required the entire summer to complete the church. We preached under the trees at the spring where the pulpit of the old church had been fastened to a tree." And how beautiful were those stately chestnut trees, where we as boys had often played!

Dedicatory services were held on Dec. 25 and 26. On the first day the Rev. Messrs. Hinterleiter and Erasmus Helffrich preached and on the following day the Rev. Messrs. Brobst and Schindel

The following Reformed pastors have served: Fred. Cassimer Miller, 1748 —; Philip Jacob Michael, — 1754; Rudolph Kitweiler, 1754-1762; Philip Jacob Michael, 1763-1774; Johann Henrich Helffrich, 1775-1780; Philip Jacob Michael, 1780-1784; Heinrich Hertzel, 1785-1795; Johann Henrich Helffrich, 1796-1810; William Dechant, 1810-1816; Johannes Helffrich, 1816-1852; William A. Helffrich, Dr. 1852-1894; Nevin W. Helffrich, (until 1894 assistant), 1879-1906; Wm. Meckstroth, 1907-1933; Donald Englert, 1934 —.

The Lutheran pastors, according to the church record were: Jacob Miller, D. D., 1817-22; Conrad Miller, 1822-31; Isaac Roeller, 1831-37; C. A. Griebler, 1837-40; Jeremiah Schindel, 1840-41; Peter Oberfeld, 1844-46; Jeremiah Schindel, 1847-1855; G. A. Hinterleiter, D. D. ((supply), 1856-57; Ferdinand Berkemeyer, 1857-59; E. M. Sell, 1859-62; Alfred Croll, 1863-68; Simon Boyer, 1868-72; David Humbert, 1871-1903; Henry W. Warmkessel (assistant through several years); J. W. Early, (supply), 1903-04; Wm. F. Bond, 1904 —.

It should be remembered that the Longswamp Church was originally Reformed. The section had been settled by Swiss, Huguenots and Palatines who were of the Reformed faith. Before 1837 the Lutherans had no church of their own in Longswamp township. As early as 1817 the Lutherans had formed an organization and rented the Reformed Church at Longswamp for their services. In 1837 the Reformed congregation voted equal rights to those Lutherans who had remained after the Lutheran congregation as an organization had removed and erected their own church, St. Pauls, at Mertztown.

Here along the Swamp the Indian once lived and roamed, to which relics found here in large quantities bear silent witness. The valley from Topton east slopes toward the direction of Macungie Valley, which is the Indian term for "the place of feeding the bears—Baere Dahl. The valley was once covered with low shrubs and scrub-oaks and the bears came here to feed. But the onward march of civilization pushed all these back and the valley became a garden spot of beauty and fertility.

Strange as it may seem, Topton, only a few miles west of the Longswamp Church, bears the right name—it is on the top! It is midway between Reading and Allentown, 18 miles from either place. South of Topton starts the Little Lehigh which flows thorugh Longsdale to Lower Longswamp, then takes a leap northward and thence via Trexler's Mill (now gone) thence to Wagenhorst's mill (also gone) thence to what was once Butz's mill (now Deysher's) thence to Romigs Mill ,etc.

On the north side of Topton is the source of the Grotte Creek, which flows via Hancock, Mertztown, etc., until it reaches the "Butze Gass," where it flows into the Little Lehigh. All this means fertility and beauty.

An unusually large number of the sons of Longswamp Church have entered into the learned professions.

Into the Ministry: Dan. Y. Heisler, Jacob Weimer, Stephen Schweitzer, Henry A. Keiser, D. D., Alexander Keiser, Morris H. Brensinger, D. D., James W. Mabry, Fred Wertz, Jacob Wagenhorst, Charles A. Butz, Ph. D., C .E .Keiser, Martin Fritch, George Fritch.

Into Medicine: Agustus Long, Levi S. Long, Wilmer Sell, M. S. Long, Howard A. Long, D. Alonzo Long, John A. Long, Wilson P. Long, Wilson DeLong, Daniel Long, Wm. F. Long, Peter Wertz, James Frank Wertz, Fred C. Knappenberger, Herman Meckstroth, Milton Fritch, J. A. Trexler, John Long.

Into Law: Samuel A. Butz, Reuben J. Butz, James P. Long, Dr. Levi S. Long, Daniel Young (Ass. Judge of Berks Co., 1851).

Records of the early days are only too scant. Of some interest therefor is the following passage from the Diary of John Daniel Young (Jung), Schoolmaster and Vorsinger (Choirmaster) from 1799 to 1808, which gives us a clear idea of what was expected of a man serving in that capacity in those early times:

"Congregation in Longswamp, 1799, April 19. I moved here under the following conditions, namely, I must play the organ and lead the singing at every public service of worship; also at such times as desired hold public catechization on Sundays; and am not to demand any compensation at funerals. On the other hand, I am to have the use of all the land belonging to the church; and am to demand from every child that attends the school three shillings nine pence per month; and from the congregation annually 12 pounds currency and 25 bushels of rye (Korn)." At first Young (Jung) taught wholly in the German language. There was an English school in Longswamp as early as 1801, to which he sent his son Daniel. In 1805 we find that Young also taught English. He gave music lessons and conducted night school. The term of school extended from the latter part of August to the middle of June, ending just in time for haying. However, the average length of attendance was only three months It is interesting to know that his son Daniel, who was elected Associate Judge in Berks Co. in 1851, was a son of the Reformed congregation at Longswamp and served for many years as church organist at Reading.

Of the early organists and Vorsinger (choirmasters) we mention Fred Hoelwig, who was serving in 1748, Jacob Weimer, 1752 to the time he entered into the ministry in 1768: Frederick Sannow, who was serving in 1785, but we do not know how long. We plan to offer later a brief sketch of that grand man, Squire William Schubert, grandfather of our friend and poet laureate of our dialect, John Birmelin, who served Longswamp as organist and Vorsinger for the long span of 52 years.

In conclusion it may be of interest to note the growth and decline of population of Longswamp township: In 1800—860; 1810—998; 1820—1371; 1830—1695; 1840—1836; 1850—1868; 1860—2217; 1870—2910; 1880—3426; 1890—3007; 1900—2507. In 1885 $239,340 were on interest and in 1908 only $89,462. In 1885 the iron ore industry was at its height in this region.

THAT CHURCH OF MINE

(Longswamp)

On lovely hill the pillars rise,
'Mid sylvan charm and smiling skies,
Of church so dear in childhood days!
With silver tongue rang precious lays
From belfry, raised so high and strong,
Like bugle sounds the trees among.

'Twere happy days with grief unknown,
And heaven about in beauty shone;
That holy shrine we oft did throng
And God, the Giver, praised in song;
Sweet dreams of youth brought their delight
And sires' God still glowed the height.

'Twere pious men so brave and true
Who promised land afar could view;
Heroic faith of Fatherland
Supported still the noble band
That onward pressed, God in the lead,
And here Him found His flock to feed.

'Mid hearths uncouth rang earnest prayers,
Oft covered vans the nightly lairs;
Triumphant faith, though fierce the blows,
Transcends the waste and brighter grows.
From darkened shores fled ravaged race
To share anew God's truth and grace.

Not wood and stone was Bethel then,
But faith enshrined in living men;
Unmixt with pride, the simple Truth
Charmed cabin's hearth, God's court, forsooth;
What lofty thought them onward led,
And heaven's shield around them spread.

Ere freedom's song rejoiced the heart,
When red men still plied crafty art,
Rose from the ground the cabin-shrine,
By sires reared of crude design;
'Twas holy place, in forest drear,
Where praises rang in accents clear.

From Pisgah's heights they viewed the land
With vision far of vast extend;
Its latent charm lured on the strong;
O'er waste soon rang the harvest song;
By sturdy strokes the sodden ground
Like garden smiled, with plenty crowned.

Soon bruins sly—where brimming brook
Meandered far—their haunts forsook,
And wigwams crude, with sudden haste
Pass on beyond the moorish waste;
From oak-laced heath rose garden fair,
No more the hold of surly bear.

As fortune smiled and years passed by
Rose other shrine to greet the eye;
Soon crestward strode a third instead,
There with delight to lift its head.
That church of mine crowns Zion's hill;
May it there e'er its office fill.

Methinks I see, though softly veiled,
The friends of yore I oft had hailed;
Again I stand with beating breast
Where oft in God my soul found rest;
I breathe once more the native air
As midst my friends I tarry there.

But morning glow, so warm and bright,
Merged all too soon with common light;
Dreamlike it seems, but fancies still
Somehow with joy my bosom fill;
Long seems the time since yester's joy
A freshness bore for dreaming boy.

But as I pause and lift my eyes
To sloping field that yonder lies,
My heart is grieved beyond compare,
To know my friends lie buried there;
The names once dear are carved in stone;
My heart is there, but they are gone.

How queer and strange—have I gone mad
To seek my friends with heart so sad?
In vain I pause the shades to peer
Or echoes faint from vault to hear.
Names carved so bright in memory's wall
Are furrowed deep on surfaced pall.

But yester's joy clings still to me
My saddened heart from paint to free;
Time's soothing touch all grief does heal
And broken bonds anew will seal.
The long ago gleaned precious store;
Its garnered wealth cheers more and more.

Time's speeding stream sweeps on with haste
The pleasant fields like desert waste;
The passing train bears treasured trust
That all too soon lies in the dust;
Hope still remains our hearts to glow,
And evermore will friendship grow.

The years have brought their earthly freight
That rests on soul like heavy weight;
But church still stands though friends are gone
And sweetly rest in death's own zone;
Embosomed there are they in love;
Though night has come, they live above.

—CHARLES ALLABAR BUTZ.